

THE CONTEXT OF KAMALA DAS'S POETICAL REBELLION

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ABSTRACT

The 'defiant' stance of the Post-colonial Indian women poets is manifest in terms of bold pronouncement of feminine urges, feelings, experiences, perceptions and viewpoints in their poetic expressions. Among the modern Indian women poets writing in English, Kamala Das is the first one who dared to speak out for those women who refuse to be tethered to the orthodoxy of tradition. The present paper appreciates Kamala Das's rebellious attitude in her poetry with reference to the socio-literary background of Indian woman-hood. It is interesting to analyze her poetry in the perspective of various socio-cultural factors that have shaped the feminine consciousness of Indian women through the ages resulting into the evolution of a poetic tradition of their own. Das tears herself off from the romantic-idealist tradition of the pre-Independence women poets and offers a realistic and concrete portrayal of contemporary feminine experience, particularly in the ambit of man-woman relationship. The poet gives voice to those who strive to come out of the identity crisis as woman positioned in a patriarchal frame of reference.

KEYWORDS: Tradition, Patriarchy, Feminist, Gender-Differentiation, Identity, Rebellion

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INTRODUCTION

In the pre-Vedic and Vedic Ages, Indian women enjoyed a considerably high status with freedom of thought as well as expression. Indian cultural history has references to the intellectual pursuits of highly learned women like Sulabha, Maitreyi and Gargi. The ancient Indian scripture *Rigveda* (1500-900 BC), contains several hymns and poems composed by women writers such as Ghosa, Surya, Vach, Apala, Vishwavara and Yami. Their verses are lively, candid and depict contemporary life from a woman's perspective giving voice to their feminine sensibility. Ghosa's *mantras* suggest that women were deemed equal to men, and in marital relationship, they were considered companions. Surya, however, in her verses tells that women, though they ruled their homes and servants, were subordinate to their husbands. Though the Vedas did prescribe certain roles to be taken on by women and the ideals like modesty and shyness were considered to be signs of virtue in a woman, it is evident from the *Shakti-cult* popular at that time that women in the pre-Vedic and Vedic period were held in high esteem.

However, a feminist reading of the Aryan's depiction of the goddesses of the *Shakti-cult* as married and under the subordination of male gods, for instance, the goddess Lakshmi shown as a devoted wife sitting at the feet of her husband Vishnu, hints at the beginning of a change in the attitude of society towards women during that period. However, in spite of the fact that the society was governed in conformity to the stern Brahmanical principals, women enjoyed considerably good status in the socio-cultural spectrum. They were free to get education, had the right to *swayamvara* (choice of husband), had the liberty to divorce and the widows were permitted to remarry.

The status of women suffered a general debilitation in the post-Vedic age, that is, the Epic period. Women were denied any kind of freedom; Manu established a patriarchal system and women were allotted a position of subordination and subjugation. He prescribed that women should always be under the control of men: in childhood, under her father's control; in youth, under her husband's; and when her husband dies, under her sons' (*Manusmriti*: 51481) The age saw an abolition of *UpanayanSanskara* for women which meant that they were debarred from intellectual, philosophical and spiritual pursuits. Female sexuality was considered as impure and polluting in nature and hence women were denied participation in various religious rites and rituals including funeral rites.

Women became the silent victims of gender-differentiation during the period till the emergence of Buddhism to counter the rigid code of Brahmanism. The Buddhist monks allowed women to join their cult and many women found a passage to emancipation and redemption by embracing Buddhism. Women could participate actively in social service and they expressed themselves in creative writings. I. B. Horner, in *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (1975), refers to *Their Gatha*, a collection of verses by women like Mahapajapati, Gotami, Ambapali, and Kshema etc. which has clear streaks of Feminism in them. (Horner:162-3) The following lines by Ambapali reflect the feminine consciousness of a subaltern identity:

Today my body is a sad shell
 They all turn aside.
 Today its walls are breaking fast
 Why did I think of it with pride
 Only the Master's truth is blazoned
 And nothing matters beside.
 (Mukherjee: 24)

Some of the Sanskrit poems written by women poets of the period as translated by P.Lal (Lal: 11) show candid expressions of both spiritual quests and sensual desires. Eunice de Souza (1997) in her 'Introduction' to *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology* has substantiated her observation that some of the poems written by women in Prakrit are "often sexually explicit in a way that few modern women can match". (de Souza: 02)

However, with the invasion of the Muslims and the consolidation of Islamic regime by the Mughals in the sixteenth century, women were once again completely subdued under the rigid codes and restraints imposed on them in the name of religion. They were completely under the authority of men and could not voice their feminine urges, feelings or sensibilities. The upsurge of the "Bhakti Movement" during the Mughal period saw some women poets like Mira Bai, Ratnavali and Jana Bai writing devotional poems in which Lord Krishna is worshipped, often personified as passionate love, but the voicing of protest against the patriarchal oppression was very rare. During the British regime of over two centuries, that is, from the eighteenth century onwards, women's status remained subdued and inferior to men. The classical ideals of Hindu womanhood, such as observation of *purdah*, self-sacrifice, tolerance, submission to the father-husband-son trio/triad, etc., were severely imposed on them.

The scenario started changing in the nineteenth century with Indian social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule etc. fighting for the redemption of women in society. The British government

also took certain steps to alleviate the poor condition of women and even framed laws to curb such social evils as ill treatment towards widows, the practices of *sati*, child marriage, polygamy and discrimination towards female education. Some Christian missionaries also helped improve the condition of women by opening up schools and inspiring women to study. Later on the Gandhian movement proved to be momentous in the regeneration of Indian women. In the words of Sunanda P. Chavan "The new social situation led women to assert, for the first time, their full identity as independent, self-made individuals in the man-oriented society." (Chavan: 08) Prominent women poets like Mahadevi Varma, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan of Hindi; Sarlabara Sarkar, Nirupama Devi of Bengali; and many other poets of Gujarati, Telugu, Marathi were giving voice to the frustrations and aspirations of women in general and Indian women in particular. Amongst these women poets, according to Sunanda P. Chavan, the Indian women poets writing in English can be described as "the boldest assertion of the modern Indian woman", because "these women have come directly under the influence of the West, whereas, the regional women poets' contact with it has been, more or less, indirect." (Chavan: 09) In the poetry of prominent women poets writing in English, like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, there is a clear impact of English education and their interaction with the English people and their literature. Izzat Yar Khan calls Sarojini Naidu "The spokesman of Indian Womanhood", as she revolted against the accepted convention of woman's place in the routine of life, and expressed her concern for the desperate condition of the widows. She also condemned evil customs such as infant marriage and the glaring disparity of age between girls and their grooms when their marriages were arranged.

In the post-colonial India the status of educated women improved with the support of several laws enacted from time to time since the implementation of the Constitution of India. Women enjoy the rights of freedom, equality of opportunity, equality with men regarding marriage and divorce. They participate actively in various social and political activities raising the women issues and demanding unconditional respect from the society. But unfortunately, common women are still victims of patriarchal mindset – humiliated, harassed and victimized in homes as well as at workplaces. Clara Nubile's observation in *The Danger of Gender* is not far off the mark when she remarks, "Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of "being a woman-wife-mother"... Only if a woman is a wife and a mother – both examples of male appendices – she gains a status in the outer world, although a very subordinate one.... Female sexuality is not seen as a personal, private matter, but a family concern." (Nubile: 22-23) Besides several restraints of gender, tradition and orthodoxy of religion, Indian women today are victims of crimes like dowry killing, physical and mental torture, sexual harassment, trafficking, etc. One tends to agree with the words of Clara Nubile, "In modern India the situation is still far from an ideal, liberated, democratic model. Indian women keep on struggling against the burden of tradition, against the legacy of the past and the orthodoxy of patriarchal system." (Nubile: 27)

Thus, the feminist strain in the poetry of Indian women poets writing in English is primarily a response to the various gender-based socio-cultural stereotyping as idealization of domesticity with passive roles for women and the objectification of women as mere objects of male's sexual pleasure. The modern feminist thought made a forceful appearance into Indian English poetry with Kamala Das who broke free from the rhetorical and romantic tradition of writing poetry and rebelled against the patriarchal mind-set of the Indian society. In the words of Kanwar Dinesh Singh "The modern feminist thought came into Indian English poetry with Kamala Das who emerged as a staunch rebel against the customary patriarchal arrangement in the Indian society. Her tone of writing is distinctly feminine; her perspective is utterly feminist and full of dissent." (Singh: 47) Other women poets who constitute the modern tradition of Indian poetry in English are Imtiaz Dharker, Gauri Deshpande, Sunita Jain, Monika Varma and Mamta Kalia, etc. voicing their feminine urges, sensibilities and aspirations. Their poetry articulates the Indian women's quest for identity and respect in the society.

Kamala Das shows an exemplary courage of conviction as she exposes the hypocrisy of the feudal, patriarchal society. In the poem entitled “Honour” she lays bare the hollowness of the upper class claims to honour. With its double standards the feudal setup cruelly discards and even kills the objectified women after subjecting them to gross misuse:

Honour was a plant my ancestors watered
 In the day, a palm to mark their future pyres, at night their
 serfs
 Let them take to bed little nieces, and pregnancy
 A puzzle to the young toys, later thrown into wells and
 Ponds
 From which they rose like lotuses and water lilies each with
 A bruise on her throat and a bulge below her naval.

(*Collected Poems* Vol. 1 Trivandrum, 1984)

Her striking images like that of “the night-girls with sham obtrusive breasts” walking on streets and “beaming their sickly smiles at men” (*Summer, 16*) bring into a vivid focus the sterile and wasted existence of an ill-adjusted individual on whom a false role has been imposed for the gratification of baser instincts of men. The transformation of a school building into a brothel house speaks a lot about the degenerating condition where women are condemned to sell off their bodies to be used as toys. In “Composition” the feminist protest is remarkable:

My first school-house
 is now a brothel,
 and
 the ladies sun themselves on the lawn
 in the afternoons
 with their greying hair,
 newly washed,
 left undyed.
 Who can say, looking at them,
 that they are toys,
 fit for the roaring nights?

(*The Descendants*, p. 63)

Kamala Das led the modern Indian women poets who broke away from the feminine romantic-idealist tradition of the pre-Independence women poets particularly in the sphere of man-woman relationship. She has reacted against the

men's essentialist descriptions of feminine character and strives to come out of the identity crisis and the objectification in a patriarchal frame of reference. Her treatment of love is candid and expressed in a confessional mode thereby carving a new definition of Indian womanhood. She negates the taboo related to the description of a woman's pubic hair and her sexual maturity and openly talks about these issues in her poems. These lines from "The Looking Glass" are quite rebellious:

Gift him all,
 Gift him what makes you a woman, the scent of
 Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
 Endless female hungers (The Descendents, p. 54)

She gives voice to the hitherto unexplored dimensions of female experience in the man-woman relationship. Most of her poems express the pains and peeves of unfulfilled love, hurts and humiliations of conjugal life, bestiality of sex, oppression of patriarchy, and suppression of identity. Kamala Das is bold enough to express her disenchantment with the traditional arranged marriages forced on young girls which would cause shattering effect on the emotional response pattern of young minds. "An introduction" depicts as to how the loveless sexual encounter in the name of marriage turns out to be a humiliating and terrible experience for the adolescent girl not only because she was a victim of physical abuse but because her "womanliness" was misused and abused:

I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
 Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
 The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
 (Summer in Calcutta, p. 05-06)

Om Prakash Grewal rightly observes that "Kamala Das's poetry has a special force and appeal for us primarily because of the honesty and candour with which she asserts her right to exist as an individual with a distinctive identity and to be her authentic self even if this involves breaking the moulds of traditional ethics and propriety." (Grewal: 130) Kamala Das refuses to fit into any groove especially created for the women by the categorizers in the name of tradition:

Be embroiderer, be cook
 Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
 Belong, cried the categorizers
 (Summer in Calcutta, p. 06)

The above lines from "An Introduction" voice the hurt and lodge a vehement protest against the senseless restrictions which compel a sensitive and intelligent woman, to limit her existence within the patriarchal set-up. In the

poem “Substitute” the poet compares the predicament of a woman to that of a circus clown in the traditional patriarchal set-up.

It will be all right when I learn
To paint my mouth like a clown's.
It will be all right if I put up my hair,
Stand near my husband to make a proud pair.

(The Descendents, p. 48)

The multiple repetition of the phrase “It will be all right” in the poem reflects a desperate effort of the wife to come to terms with the norms prescribed by the society.

The anguish of a woman who finds herself tied down to a monotonous routine of household activities can be noticed in several of her poems. In “The Siesta” we find the poet asking herself ironically if she could have ‘the courage’ and ‘the sense’

To pick herself an average
Identity, to age
Through years of earthly din
Gently, like a cut flower until
It's time to be removed;

(Summer in Calcutta, p. 31)

The imagery of ‘cut-flower’ powerfully expresses the process in which a woman will have to smother even her dreams that ‘glow pearl-white’ and ‘seem hardly mortal’. In fact, domestication which means everyday household drudgery threatening the freedom and individuality of a woman is regarded by the feminists as a tool to perpetuate the subordinate status of women. MamtaKalia, another feminist poet, has also lodged her protest against this ‘oppression by domestication’ in her poem “Love Made a Housewife of Me”,

Unmade beds, dirty linen
Papers long folded, slippers thrown,
A sinkful of plates
And a head full of ache.

(“Love Made a Housewife of Me” ll. 12-18)

“The Old Playhouse” is a protest against the woman being reduced to a ‘wife’; a person shorn of identity and individuality. The male ego has become monstrous deriving its evil power from the patriarchal set-up that has reduced the female to a helpless pigmy:

you were pleased

With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions....You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, p. 69)

"The Looking Glass" ironically reflects the helplessness of the woman as it reflects the desires of the woman to portray her man as the stronger part in the pair. If the man leaves her, she suffers from loneliness and lack of love and if the man dies, she keeps lamenting over his death throughout her life. So, in this situation where is her individuality in the marriage? Isn't it all about man and woman is just a foil to prove his superiority? Das questions the status of woman in marriage and protests against the marital love turning into lust, lacking emotional compatibility and becoming a relationship of dominance by man over woman. In the poem the mirror emerges as the complex symbol of societal attitude that perpetuates the gender bias and illustrates the pride of man and the humiliations of woman.

Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger lovelier

(The Descendents, p. 54)

"The Freaks" expresses the suffocation of a loveless marriage. The phraseology employed in the poem effectively conveys the disgust of an entrapped woman towards her husband to whom she is socially tied. She is utterly helpless and hopeless:

The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence

(Summer in Calcutta, p. 08)

Her empty heart is filled with a stinging silence comparable to coiled snakes which could sting a person at the least provocation. She calls herself a freak or an abnormal person who has to flaunt "a grand, flamboyant lust" to fit into the stereotype conjugal relationship. A. N. Dwivedi rightly observes that the images like 'sun-stained cheek' 'puddles of desire', 'an empty cistern' and 'coiling snakes of silence' effectively suggest "an overpowering sense of dejection and rejection on the part of the sexually conscious woman" (Dwivedi: 94). In despair she asks:

Who can
 Help us who have lived so
 Long and have failed in love?

(*Summer in Calcutta*, p. 08)

Through her defiant self-assertion the poet increases our awareness of how the dead weight of outworn values can block the emotional and intellectual growth of an individual. For Kamala Das the writing of poetry emerges as a rebellious act of self-definition in desperate situations. The intense pain and utter helplessness experienced in living a life in an andocentric, constrictive culture finds strong expression in “The Stone Age”:

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind
 Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
 Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
 Dove, you build round me a shabby drawing room,
 And stroke my pitted face absentmindedly while
 You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep,
 You stick a finger into my dreaming eye.

(*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*: P. 78)

PurnenduChatterjee has aptly observed, “The expressions ‘ancient settler’ and ‘old fat spider’ reflect the scorn that the persona bears for her husband and the feeling of hatred is further heightened by the skilful use of the adjective ‘fond’.” (Chatterjee: 75) The juxtaposition of opposites – bird-stone and granite-dove – brings out the misery of the woman. His ‘stroking’ of her face while not even looking at her reflects the insensitivity of the male figure and the acute humiliation of the female. The contrast inherent in the shocking imagery, “you stick a finger into my dreaming eye” conveys a sense of intense suffering. As AnisurRahman rightly observes, “Obviously, the poet relies on the poetic strategy of contrast to accentuate the effect of pain.” (Rahman: 21)

The frank, confessional quality of her poetry is Kamala Das’s main strength which tends to suffer from a dash of callow exhibitionism, particularly when she has to flaunt her “flamboyant lust”. This occasional absence of a mature self-restraint reflects her desperate attempt to retrieve her undermined dignity. “The Dance of the Eunuchs” effectively presents the painful, frenzied and self-consuming life of an ill-adjusted sensitive individual in a society with biased notions of gender roles. The despair and discomfiture of a woman in the ambit of man-woman relationship is expressed through an objective correlative of the eunuchs who represent a sheer contrast between the outwardly pretence of passion and joy, and the inwardly vacuity of emotion, love and passion. The atmosphere and the rhythms in the poem reinforce the meaning conveyed by the central image of a group of sterile and harassed individuals dancing their grotesque dance as a command performance:

Their voices
 Were harsh, their songs melancholy: they sang of

Lovers dying and of children left unborn...
Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.

(Summer in Calcutta, 07)

The 'vacant ecstasy' of these figures symbolizes the exasperated turmoil experienced by frustrated individuals who are shut off from the larger currents of social life. The images powerfully articulate the emotional and intellectual turbulence in the lives of individuals especially women which forms a necessary component of the process of 'modernization' that Indian society has been undergoing for a long time. To put it in the words of A. N. Dwivedi, "The Dance of Eunuchs' objectifies, through an external, familiar situation, the poet's strangled desire within" (Dwivedi: 05).

The frustration and acrimony are often reflected in the diction and style of expressions. In "Composition" she writes,

Now here is a girl with vast
sexual hunger,
a bitch after my own throat.

(The Descendents, p. 58)

In the words of S. C. Harrex,

Many of Kamala Das's poems epitomize the dilemma of the modern woman who attempts to free herself, sexually and domestically, from role bondage sanctioned by the past. (Harrex: 163)

Kamala Das questions the traditional and romantic concept of happiness in marriage and articulates the muffled protest of those women who are forced to compromise their individuality and identity in the name of sanctity of womanhood and domestic duties. There is a tendency of radical feminism in some of her significant poems expressing the modern woman's urge to break free from the patriarchal domination. Often writing in the confessional mode of Western Feminist writers like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Kamala Das has succeeded in going into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of the feminine mind. Marriage came as a disappointment to the woman persona and this failure to get true love within the framework of marriage leads her to seek it outside wedlock. The poet seems to write from her own experience. In her autobiography entitled *MyStory* she confesses, "In the orbit of licit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence" (Das:191) In "My Grandmother's House", she admits,

"beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?"

(Summer in Calcutta, p. 13)

However, even her escapades into the domain of "adultery" remain a futile exercise. She realizes that the adulterous relationships only assuage the "skin's lazy hungers" with physical passion as described in "Convicts":

That was the only kind of love,
 This hacking at each other's parts
 Like convicts hacking, breaking clods,
 At noon.

(*The Descendents*, p. 55)

Leading a persecuted and tortured existence, the persona craves for a love that would give her happiness without hurting and humiliating her. Sunanda P. Chavan aptly comments:

The beloved yearns for the kind of love which will be a spiritual experience involving meaningful sexual relationship without the loss of her identity. (Chavan: 11)

The reference to the mythical world of Radha-Krishna further widens the horizon of the treatment of man-woman relationship in the context Indian socio-cultural scene. The agony of not experiencing true love turns the poet to the mythical world of Radha-Krishna and Vrindavan in an attempt to seek justification for the quest for fulfillment even if outside the marriage. The poem entitled "Maggots" delineates Radha's failure to experience rapture in the arms of her husband, she remains indifferent as a corpse:

what is
 It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

(*The Descendents*, p. 45)

On the other hand in "Radha" her sentimental description of the ecstasy of Radha who experiences the dissolution of the individual self and the total identification in Krishna's embrace is quite suggestive:

Everything in me
 Is melting, even the hardness at core
 O, Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
 Nothing remains but
 You....

(*The Descendents*, p. 45)

In psychological terms, her imagination expresses her desire to experience 'absolute liberty from the rigid social code and the constraints of super ego in the presence of primal self' (Kakar: 142) in man-woman relationship. Another woman poet who wrote on Krishna was Sorojini Naidu. Her poem "Ghanshyam" is a hymn in praise of God where she offers the lord not her body like Kamala Das but her "yearning soul" – "O take my yearning soul for thine oblation." As Mallikarjuna Rao points out, "In Sorojini Naidu the Radha-Krishna relationship is a metaphor for that between *Atman* and *Brahma*; in Kamala Das the relationship, though one of ideal lovers is realized in human terms, and as such it does not rise to 'the divine level'. Sorojini Naidu's Radha is not anti-sexual, yet sex is not the primary concern in the Radha poems. But in Kamala Das sex implies a "deep and intense relationship" which is not devotional; it is very much human in concern."

(Rao: 63) Thus, considering from the feminist perspective Das's thoughts about Krishna gives her relief from the asphyxiating male chauvinism. Fritz Blackwell's observation is very relevant in this context that the poet's "concern is literary and existential, not religious; she is using a religious concept for a literary motive and metaphor." (Blackwell: 13)

CONCLUSIONS

Kamala Das questions the traditional and romantic concept of happiness in marriage and articulates the muffled protest of those women who are forced to compromise their individuality and identity in the name of sanctity of womanhood and domestic duties. There is a tendency of radical feminism in some of her significant poems expressing the urge to break free from the patriarchal domination. Often writing in the confessional mode of Western Feminist writers like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Kamala Das has succeeded in going into the subconscious needs, desires and aspirations of the feminine mind. She has dared to use numerous erotic and bold images, hitherto considered as taboo by her Indian English female predecessors, reflecting the brutality of loveless sex and the horror of the desperateness of a tortured existence. The persona of her poems craves for a love that would give her the highest form of happiness, without hurting and humiliating her. Her poems give voice to the suppressed tension in the mind of modern Indian women who are caught in the dilemma of their individual needs and the demands of the traditional society. The poetic world of Kamala Das is connected to the larger historical and cultural contexts as well as complicated, shifting post-colonial identities. Though many scholars do not approve of Kamala Das as an aesthetic poet, they still find her as a prominent figure for the explicitness, honest and bold expressions in her writings. Today her poetry is appreciated as a maiden effort of an Indian woman to express herself without much inhibition circumscribed by the false and hypocritical rules of a conservative society. She stands as an important figure whose bold and honest voice has reenergized Indian writing in English.

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